Educating Generation X and Generation Y: Teaching Tips for Librarians

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ABSTRACT. This article provides a list of helpful teaching tips for instructional librarians who need to meet the changing generational needs of their patrons. Specific generational qualities and attitudes of Generation X and Generation Y are discussed along with educational techniques and software recommendations. These tips are based on the authors' experiences at Drexel University's Hahnemann Library and Thomas Jefferson University's Scott Memorial Library, both of which are academic health sciences libraries. *[Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <docdelivery@haworthpress.com> Website: <http://www.HaworthPress.com> © 2004 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]*

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INTRODUCTION

With the advancement of technology and the proliferation of online databases over the past few years, teaching Generation X and Genera-

tion Y allied health students has become a challenge. Generation X are students who were born between 1965 and 1981, and Generation Y are students born 1982 to the present.[1] Each generation is unique, and each has its own set of learning experiences. Nevertheless, there are certain overlapping traits and, therefore, a variety of teaching techniques that work effectively in educating future generations of allied health professionals to improve their information literacy skills.

   This article will suggest several teaching tips based on the numerous generational characteristics that the authors have observed in the combined six years that they have been teaching workshops to allied health students at Drexel University and Thomas Jefferson University. Most of the students at these institutions are graduate and returning students.

EDUCATIONAL TIPS

Tip #1: Introduce Yourself

   When starting a workshop, begin by introducing yourself. Be sure to mention your background including your degrees and where they were obtained. Students feel that they are more comfortable with technology than their teachers and that "their teachers' use of technology is uninspiring."[2] Let them know that you are a capable teacher with both experience and a relevant educational background. Mention that you spend most of your day searching databases. Also, throw in a touch of what you do outside of work. Make yourself human in their eyes so they can relate to you. Start by sharing an anecdote to help engage the students. This is a good icebreaker "because Gen Yers usually find peers more credible than teachers."[3] If they can relate to you, you have more of a chance of holding their interest. Invite your students to discuss issues and to ask questions throughout the workshop.

Tip #2: Workshop Must Be Relevant to Real World

   After introducing yourself, be sure to clearly outline the goals of the session and why the lesson is relevant to the students in the workshop. Explain the importance of learning how to search CINAHL effectively and that it will help them to generate better results and will save them time. Providing a personal incentive, such as showing students how they can improve their results, enhance their work product, and save time searching, always attracts positive attention.

Another good tactic that enhances a workshop and gains the attention of students is to emphasize a real life situation. One example that might be used is the recent case at Johns Hopkins, where a better literature search might have prevented the death of a student who was a research subject.[4] Both generations have a belief that since they grew up with the Internet that they are expert searchers.[5] Rarely do we notice students using advanced search operators, such as adjacency, or using limits effectively.

Offering positive examples is also important, for instance, showing how evidence-based practice literature can be used to change policies and standard beliefs. The authors have used the North Mississippi Medical Center (NMMC; Tupelo, Miss.) as an example of one institution that has been using EBP literature (along with other sophisticated measures) to improve clinical outcomes since 1992. In one success story at this medical center, nurses removed Foley catherters before morning rounds, resulting, "in a 1-day-earlier discharge, which produced a decrease in LOS [length of stay] of 33 days and reduced patient charges by $10,000 in the first 6 months."[6]

Tip #3: Design Visually Appealing Handouts and Online Modules

The average student retains only 10% of what he or she reads, but 20% to 30% of what he or she sees.[7] Both Generation X and Generation Y grew up with computer games, television, and multimedia presentations. Thus, providing documentation that is text heavy is a disservice to the students. From personal experience, documents that are text-based are not as popular as documents rich in images, including screen shots and step-by-step instructions.[8]

Even better are short online tutorials that demonstrate a search technique. Screen capture software, such as Camtasia or RoboDemo, allow for easy capturing of screen shots with the option of including voice over to further explain a step. Screen captures can also be included in a PowerPoint presentation to help engage students. Figure 1 illustrates a screen capture, and Figures 2 and 3 illustrate slides created from RoboDemo. All were well received by the "Gen X" and "Gen Y" students at the authors' institutions.

Tip #4: Utilize Humor

Using humor in a presentation is always a positive. The more recent a humorous reference, the better. Irony tends to work well, as does

FIGURE 1. Sample Screen Capture from CINAHL for PowerPoint Presentation
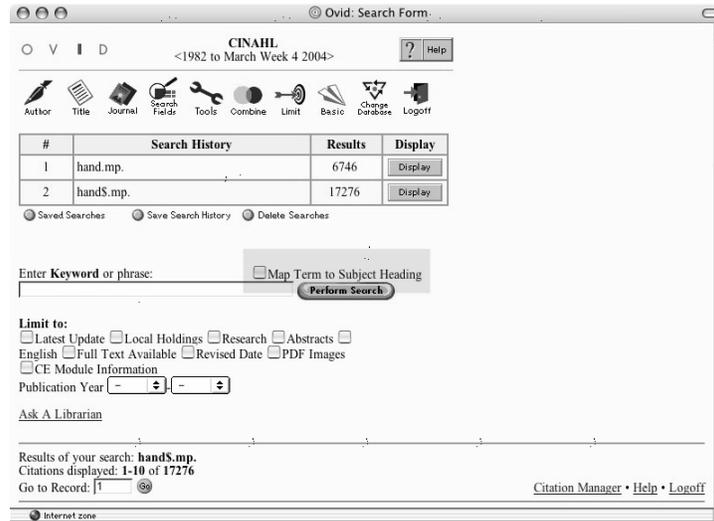
Copyright (c) 2000-2004 Ovid Technologies, Inc.
CINAHL® Database © 1982-2004, CINAHL Information Systems

FIGURE 2. Starting a RoboDemo Module: "PowerPoint Pearls: Applying Slide Transitions"
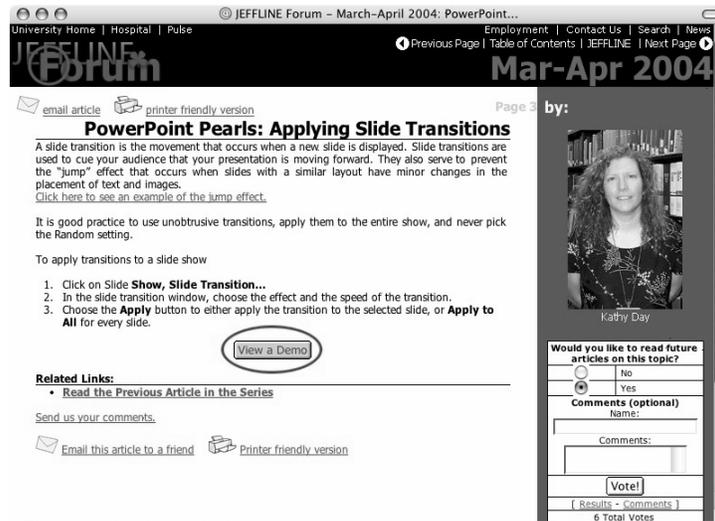

Photo used with permission.
Screen shot reprinted by permission from Microsoft Corporation.

FIGURE 3. Sample RoboDemo Module: "PowerPoint Pearls: Applying Slide Transitions"[9]
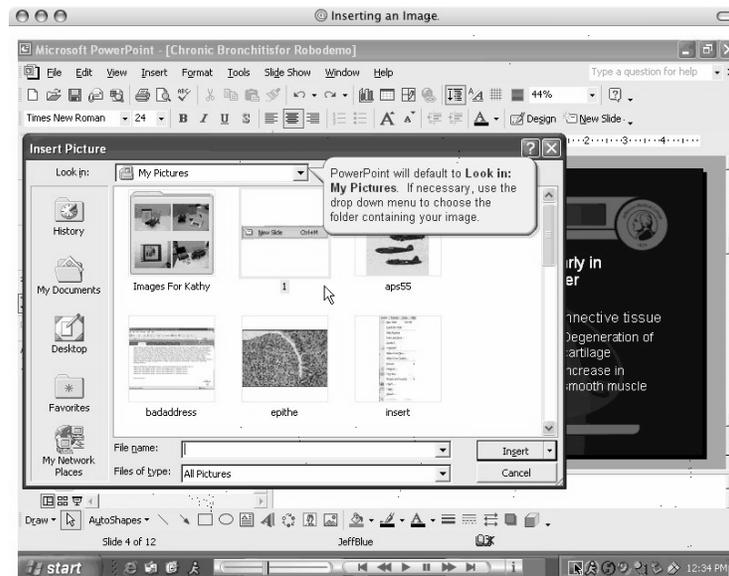
RoboDemo used with permission.
Screen shot reprinted by permission from Microsoft Corporation.

self-deprecating humor. Some humor can be corny, such as when asking if any students know what AIM journals are and then mentioning that it has nothing to do with the toothpaste. This reference always gets a smile or two. Try to use acronyms to explain what terms mean. Many students believe that OVID stands for something, such as Online Video Information Database or Online Virtual Information Database. Explaining how OVID refers to the Roman Poet, who was an innovator of his time, and how the founders of the company wanted to pick a historic name that captured the idea of their innovative technology are good teaching points that allow for humor.[10]

Tip #5: Emphasize Customizable Database Features

Both generations have a tremendous interest in customized products and services. Services such as My Yahoo, where students can customize news alerts, to more library-related features such as "autoalerts" or SDIs available in Ovid and other databases allow students to have more control over their searches.

Tip #6: Design Team Assignments

Both Gen Y and Gen X seek comfort with those who share their own values. This provides a wonderful opportunity for group assignments. They tend to work well together, and more importantly, they tend to respect their peers more so than instructors. During the past 25 years, cooperative learning strategies have been implemented in elementary and high school classrooms as alternatives to traditional teaching methods. The cooperative teaching techniques have improved content learning, student achievement, and student self-esteem, which may explain why current students are comfortable collaborating on assignments.[11] Examples for working together could include working on a search strategy together, discussing appropriate search terms, deciding how to proceed with a search, and then evaluating citations to determine their strengths and weaknesses.

Tip #7: Flexibility Is a Positive

Both generations have an indifference to rules and regulations. In some cases it may be appropriate to provide them with an opportunity to select or define some aspect of an assignment. Flexibility is seen as a positive. Bearing this in mind, it is advisable to mention plagiarism during bibliographic instruction. Try to avoid being stodgy while bringing this up; a simple explanation will work. If your institution has a student code of ethics or an honor code, remind students to be careful with their note taking. A friend once commented, "If you copy something and don't cite it, you're plagiarizing. If you do the same thing and include a reference, that's research!" Both Generation X and Generation Y live in a world of file sharing and "cutting and pasting," and the distinction between owner and creator are fading; however, students must still understand the difference between original and secondary works.

Tip #8: Be Fair

Nothing tends to be sacred to students with regard to business, government, and society. They have witnessed corporate scandals, philandering politicians, and an unruly society. This puts the emphasis on being a fair and succinct instructor. When addressing students, honesty is refreshing. If you do not know an answer to a question, let them know you'll look into it and get back to the class. However, if you promise to

find an answer, make sure you follow up and provide that answer via e-mail or in the next class.

Tip #9: Establish Authority, but Remain Amicable

With both generations, relationship building works best, not hierarchical structures. Try to establish your authority, but invite participation and display empathy. During a bibliographic instruction session, allow the students to address you by your first name. In a more formal class session, refer to yourself as Professor or Librarian, but try to keep a welcoming environment. During any of these sessions do not make idle threats if the class is not paying attention. Student use of Instant Messaging and checking e-mail during class can be avoided by using Timbuktu or Altiris Vision software, which allows the teacher to control the students' computers. Another approach is to ask them to turn off their computer monitors to focus on what you are demonstrating.

Tip #10: Offer Extensive Help Options

Upon completing a bibliographic instruction workshop, be sure to mention the multiple methods available for students to obtain further research assistance. As mentioned previously, this generation enjoys customization, so mention the different types of help that are available. At Jefferson and Drexel, research assistance available to students includes one-on-one reference service, on-line tutorials (Web guides and PDF style worksheets), telephone and e-mail assistance.[12, 13] Alternative services include establishing computer and office hours and virtual chat sessions. Both generations expect immediate feedback and assistance when a research problem arises.[14] Offering multiple research help options allows students to choose which works best for them. In addition, providing students with help in research procedures establishes standards for students as well as library staff.

CONCLUSION

Students from Generation Y and Generation X are different from older generations of students. They learn differently, but there are teaching methods that work effectively for both generations. The ten tips for effective instruction of Generation X and Generation Y students are based on the authors' teaching experiences. Following is a summary

of characteristics of Gen X and Y students that are useful in developing library workshops and instruction sessions for this group of students.

- Want to be recognized as individuals
- Want a voice in class decisions
- Want to establish rapport with the instructor
- Value group interactions
- View class time as social and educational experience
- Need nonjudgmental sounding board
- Don't like being passive recipients of information
- Must be engaged to retain information
- Want a variety of learning experiences
- Are used to being entertained
- Need course work that must be relevant to real world
- Want to learn marketable skills
- Want information to be current

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